

## Complaints Policy 2025-2026

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<b>Approved by:</b>	
<b>Last review: September 2025</b>	<b>Next review: September 2026</b>

## **Introduction to the Complaints Procedure**

Dorset Studio School takes pride in the quality of the education and care it provides to its students.

It is everyone's best interest that concerns and complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. Many issues can be resolved informally, without the need to use the formal stages of the complaints procedure.

The aim of this policy is to ensure that any concern or complaint is managed effectively, efficiently and with empathy. In addition, where necessary, we will review our policies, systems and procedures in light of the circumstances.

This policy deals with concerns or complaints from parent(s)/carer(s)/family of current students and of former students provided the complaint was raised whilst the student was still registered at the school.

In rare instances, any member of the public raises a concern or complaint about the school, and where the matter raised falls within the scope of this policy, the Principal is authorised to investigate and respond to the complainant in writing.

## **Key Principles**

The school expects all complainants to make reasonable steps to seek an informal resolution. This will usually be the most effective way to swiftly resolve any concerns.

To investigate complaints properly and fairly, the school has implemented a staged **approach**. The school anticipates that almost all complaints will be dealt with at **Stage 1 or Stage 2**.

The school understands that raising concerns or complaints is often difficult, emotional, and stressful, particularly for parents(s)/carer(s)/family. All our staff will be respectful and courteous. Similarly, the school also expects complainant(s) to act in the same way. The school will not accept abusive and threatening behaviour towards our staff at any time. The school will immediately suspend the complaints process where the school judges that the behaviour of the complainant is unreasonable.

The school defines unreasonable behaviour as that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainants contact with school. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator defines the characteristics of a vexatious complaint as:

**complaints which are obsessive, persistent, harassing or repetitious.**

Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Serial of persistent complaints based on the same or similar facts and where every reasonable step has been taken to address the complaint in full, including providing the complainant with a clear statement of the school's position and their options
- Refusal to articulate their complaint or specify grounds of the complaint or the outcomes sought
- Refuses to cooperate with the complaints investigation procedure
- Refuses to accept the scope of the complaints procedure
- Repeatedly makes the same complaint despite previous investigations and responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been resolved
- Makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by e-mail and by telephone whilst the complaint is being dealt with
- Raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, insisting they are fully answered, often to their imposed timescales
- Changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds
- Refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into the complaint where the school's complaint procedure has been properly implemented and completed, including a possible referral to the Department of Education
- Publishes unacceptable information related to the investigation on social media or other public forums
- Knowingly provide falsified information
- Seeks an unrealistic or unmeritorious outcome
- Use abusive, offensive, threatening or discriminatory language

**Where a complaint is deemed to be unreasonable or vexatious there will be no further action taken by school**

If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example the police or local authority, this may impact our ability to adhere to the timescales within this policy or result in the procedure being suspended until other investigations have finished.

If a complainant commences legal action against Dorset Studio School in relation to their complaint, the school will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure until those legal proceedings have concluded.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to take steps to restrict the complainant access to the school, requesting contact in a particular format, requiring contact to take place through a named single point of contact, restricting telephone calls to specified days and times

Where the the complainant's behaviour is so extreme that threatens the immediate safety of any member of the school community, the school will consider its options, including reporting the matter to the police, other agencies such as social services or take legal action

The timescales within this policy refer to ‘school days’ which excludes weekends, school holidays and periods of partial or full school closure.

**What constitutes a complaint?**

A complaint is a means of expressing dissatisfaction, however made, about actions taken, unfair treatment or a lack of action. This could be an actual or perceived problem. Furthermore, the term ‘complaint’ may not be used for a matter to be dealt with by school. However, if the parent(s)/carer(s)/family deem that a formal resolution is required, the school will clarify that it is dealing with a ‘formal complaint’ and is subject to the process outlined in this policy.

A concern means an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought.

This policy covers all concerns and complaints about the school except where these are covered in separate policies outlined below:

<p><b>Admissions or Appeals</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any concerns or complaints about admissions are managed through the Dorset Studio School Admissions policy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Matters likely to require A Child Protection investigation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This policy does not apply to safeguarding concerns related to students or allegations of abuse made against staff, including supply teachers and volunteers. These are managed under the DSS Safeguarding Policy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Suspension and Exclusion</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All matters related to suspension and exclusion are managed under the DSS Suspension &amp; Exclusion Policy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Staff Conduct</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complaints against staff conduct will be dealt with under the DSS Staff Code of Conduct policy</li> <li>The complainant will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken. However, the complainant will be notified that the matter is being addressed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Staff grievances</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complaints from staff will be dealt under the school’s internal grievance procedures.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Freedom Of Information Requests</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Please consult the Data Protection and Freedom of Information policy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Subject Access Requests</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For Subject Access Requests, please consult the Data Protection and Freedom of Information policy</li> </ul>

<b>Whistleblowing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dorset Studio School has a whistleblowing procedure for all employees, including temporary staff, volunteers and contractors</li> <li>• The Secretary of State for Education is the prescribed person for matters related to education for whistle-blowers who do not want to make direct contact with their employer</li> </ul>
<b>Anonymous Complaints</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dorset Studio School will not normally respond to anonymous complaints. However, the Principal and Chair of Governors will determine whether the matter raised requires investigation</li> </ul>

### **Implementation of the complaints procedure**

A complainant must raise the complaints within three months of the incident, or where there are a series of associated incidents that have occurred, within three months of the last of these incidents. The school will only consider any complaints made outside of this timeframe if exceptional circumstances apply.

The timescales for any complaints made outside of term time will be considered to have commenced on the first day of the next term.

### **Resolution of a complaint**

At each stage in the procedure, Dorset Studio School wants to resolve the complaint. If appropriate, the school will acknowledge that the complaint is upheld in part or whole. The school may offer one or more of the following:

- An explanation
- An admission that the matter could have been handled differently
- An assurance that the school will take steps to try and prevent any recurrence of the issue
- An explanation of steps taken, or will be taken, to ensure the matter will not happen again
- An apology
- A review of particular school policies in light of the complaint

### **Withdrawal of a complaint**

In the event that a complainant wants to withdraw a complaint, the school will ask them to do so in writing.

### **Stage 1: Informal Concerns**

An informal concern can be raised in person, by email or telephone. Concerns may also be raised by a family member of a third party acting on behalf of parent(s)/carer(s) if they have appropriate consent to do so.

The following table determines with which member of staff the complaint should be raised:

Concern	Member of Staff	May be referred to
Academic	Class teacher	Head of Subject
Pastoral	Pastoral Lead	Senior Leader
A broader concern	Vice-Principal	Principal

- Raising a concern by telephone, please contact the school on:
- Raising a concern by e-mail, please use the following e-mail address:
- In-person: it is advisable to make an appointment since there is no guarantee of an ad-hoc meeting

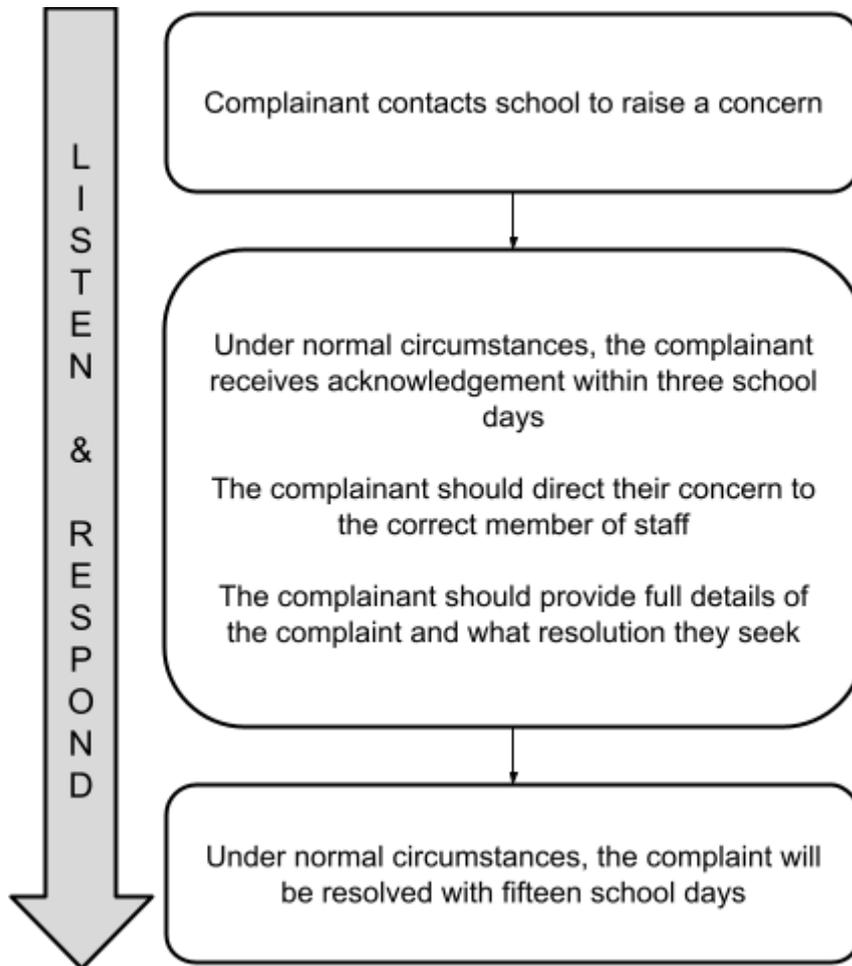
It is always helpful if there is a full explanation of the complaint, who the complaint is directed to, and the resolution sought. In all cases, the member of staff will briefly record the nature of the complaint (if it has been through a telephone call or in-person) and the agreed actions required, if appropriate, to resolve the matter.

The member of staff dealing with the concern will, under normal circumstances, acknowledge it within **three school days** of its receipt.

It is always our intention to listen and respond, working constructively to resolve the matter as quickly as possible. There is no suggested timescale for resolution given the importance of informal discussion and the time required to review the successful impact of any appropriate actions put into place. However, it is reasonable to expect that the most concerns will be resolved satisfactorily within **fifteen school days**.

If the matter is brought to the attention of the Principal; they may decide to deal with the concern directly at this stage. If the concerns are about the Principal these should be referred directly to the Complaints Coordinator under Stage 2 of the process at:

## Summary of Stage 1 - Informal Concern



## Stage 2 - Formal Complaint

Formal complaints must be made to the Principal (unless they are about the Principal). At this stage, complaints can also be made in **writing**. The school strongly advises complainants to use the 'Stage 2 Complaints Form' provided as **appendix 1**.

The Stage 2 Complaints Form ensures that the complainant provides full information about the nature of the complaint, details of how it has been dealt with so far, the names of any potential witness/witnesses, time(s) and date(s) of the event(s), the inclusion of any copies of relevant documentation and a clear statement of the actions that the complainant would like the school to take to resolve the complaint.

Within this response, the Principal will normally acknowledge the receipt of the complaint within **five school days** of receiving it. The acknowledgement will provide a brief overview of the complaint's procedure and a target date for providing a response to the complaint within **thirty school days** of the receipt of the complaint.

If appropriate, the Principal (or a senior leader appointed by them) will consider whether an in-person meeting is the most appropriate way of clarifying the complaint and explore the resolution of it. One other person may attend this meeting in order to assist the complainant. Where possible, the meeting will take place within **ten school days** of the receipt of the written complaint.

If necessary, any witnesses will be interviewed and statements taken. If the complaint involves a student, they will be interviewed in the presence of two members of staff and their parent(s)/carer(s)/family may be informed. In the case of a member of staff, they will be given the opportunity to respond to the complaint.

If necessary, the school may engage an independent, external person to carry out the investigation or review the decision of it where the complaint is particularly complex and/or involves legal issues.

Once the relevant facts have been established as far as possible, the complainant(s) will be provided with a written response, including an explanation of the decision and the reasons for it. It will also include what action, if any, will be taken to resolve the complaint. There are three possible outcomes that the Principal can decide to:

- Uphold the complaint and, where appropriate, direct relevant action to be taken
- Uphold the complaint in part and, where appropriate, direct certain action to be taken
- Dismiss the complaint in its entirety

The Principal will advise the complainant(s) of how to escalate their complaint should they be dissatisfied with the outcome of stage 2.

### **Stage 2 Complaint about the Principal or the Principal has already considered it at Stage 1**

If the complaint is about the Principal or the Principal has already considered the concern under Stage 1, the complaint should be sent to the complaints co-ordinator at

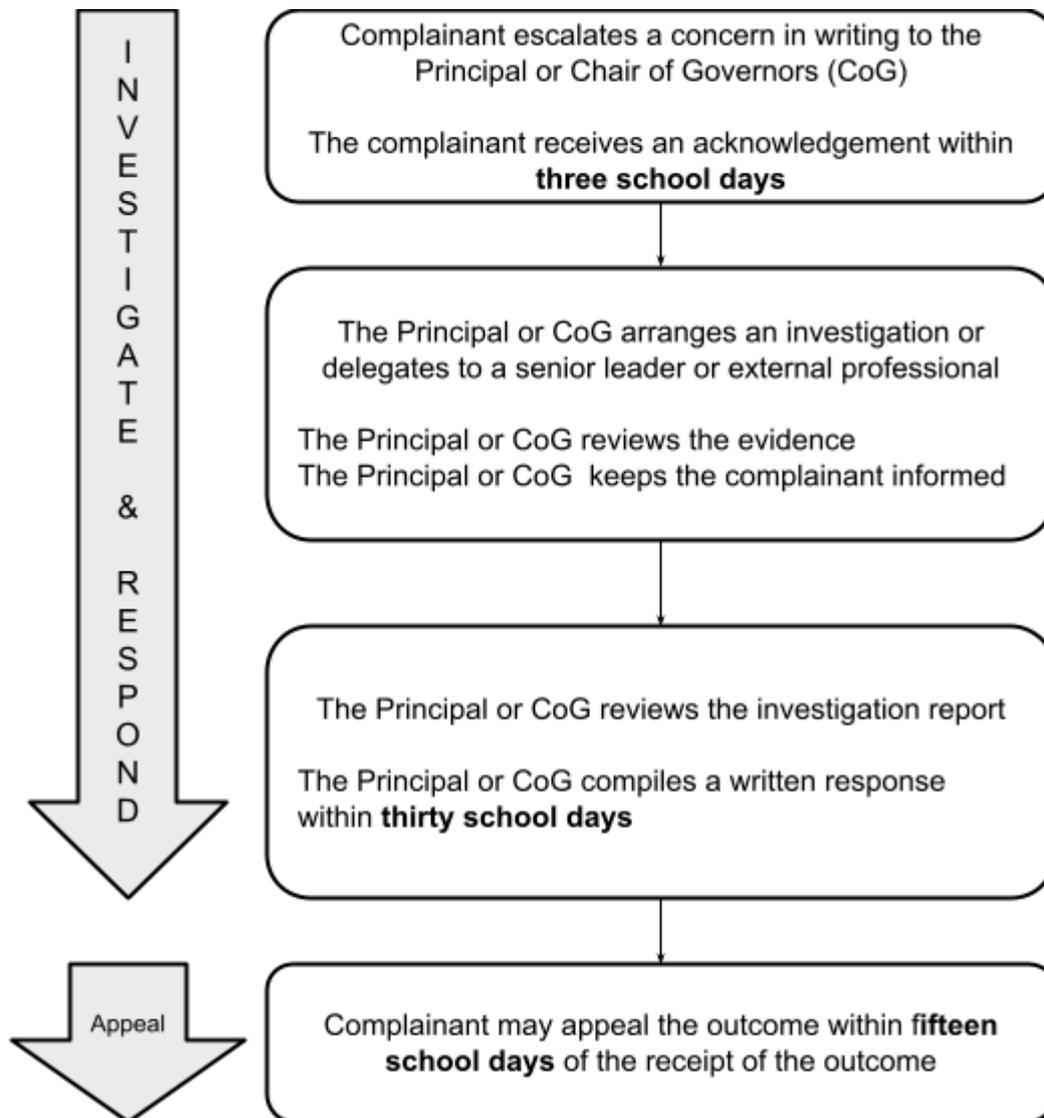
**[governanceandcomplaints@dorsetstudioschool.co.uk](mailto:governanceandcomplaints@dorsetstudioschool.co.uk)**

The complaints co-ordinator will arrange for a governor to carry out the stage 2 procedure. If the complaint is related to the Chair of Governors or another named governor, the complaints co-ordinator will arrange for another governor with no connection to the complaint to investigate the matter.

If there is a complaint about the clerk to governors, it should also be sent to the governance and complaints e-mail address.

If there is a complaint made against a member of staff, including governors, a copy of the complaint will be shared with them in order to carry out a full investigation.

## Summary of Stage 2 - Formal Complaint



## Stage 3 : Referral to the Complaints Committee

A complainant can request a review of the decision and the actions taken at Stage 2 provided the appeal is lodged with:

**[governanceandcomplaints@dorsetstudioschool.co.uk](mailto:governanceandcomplaints@dorsetstudioschool.co.uk)**

within fifteen school days of the receipt of the original outcome. Requests outside of this timeframe will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

At this stage, the complainant should ensure that the grounds for the complaint, copies of any relevant documentation and the desired outcome(s) are provided. If this evidence is incomplete, it may slow the procedure down.

The Complaints Coordinator will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within **five school days**. They will arrange for a Complaints Committee to convene. Every effort will be made to ensure this meeting is held within **twenty school days** of the receipt of the request.

The Complaints Committee will review the work of the investigating officer, who will attend the meeting. Where the investigating officer was the chair of Governors, the Principal is not expected to attend.

The Complaints Committee will be made up of at least three members, including:

- Those with governance experience
- A committee member who is independent of the leadership and management of the school
- An educational professional with no link to the school

The Complaints Coordinator will appoint one of these members to be the Chair of the Complaints Committee.

A stage three hearing will only examine the evidence and actions taken at stage two and will allow the complainant to put any remaining concerns forward. The committee will not review a new complaint or consider any new evidence that is not related to the original complaint. New complaints must be dealt with a stage one of the complaints procedure.

As soon as reasonably practicable and, in any event, at least **five school days** before the hearing, the complainant(s) will be sent a written notification by e-mail of the date, time and pace of the hearing, together with brief details of who is attending.

If it is not possible to find a mutually convenient date and time for a hearing within a reasonable timeframe, the Complaints Coordinator may determine the hearing proceeds on the basis of written submissions from the complainant and the investigating officer.

A copy of the complaint, other documentation and the desired outcome will be electronically provided to the complainant(s), members of the committee at least **three days** prior to the hearing. The Complaints Committee will not consider any documentation presented less than three days before the hearing.

Furthermore, the Complaints Committee is not under any obligation to hear oral evidence but may choose to do so. The Complaints Committee will not normally accept recordings of any conversations unless there was informed consent.

The Complaints Committee will be held in private either in-person or remotely. Electronic recording of the meeting is not permitted unless a complainant's own special educational needs and/or disability require it.

The complainant has the right to be accompanied by a family member or friend. However, the complainant must inform the complaints co-ordinator in advance of the intention to bring someone along. If there is an intention to bring any legal representation along to the hearing, both the complainant(s) and/or the school must be informed in advance of the meeting.

After due consideration of all the evidence and information considered appropriate and relevant, the committee will make its findings as to whether the stage two decision was a reasonable one and accordingly can decide to:

- Uphold the complaint and, if appropriate, recommend certain action to be taken to resolve it
- Uphold the complaint in part and, if appropriate, recommend certain action to be taken
- Recommend changes to procedures or systems to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not happen again
- Dismiss the complaint entirely

Whilst the committee can make recommendations to the school as a result of its deliberations it has no power to make the school take action.

A final written response will be sent electronically and will be provided to the complainant within **five school days** of the date of the committee review.

### **Right of Appeal**

The decision of the stage three committee hearing is final. If the complainant is concerned that the complaints procedure has not been correctly followed, they can request a request of the Complaints Committee process. In this case, the Complaints Coordinator will arrange for an independent review to undertake a review. The complainant has **fifteen school days** from the receipt of the final written response to do this and should express their concerns in writing to:

**[governanceandcomplaints@dorsetstudioschool.co.uk](mailto:governanceandcomplaints@dorsetstudioschool.co.uk)**

On receipt of the request to review the procedure an acknowledgement will be sent within **three school days**. In normal circumstances, it is at the discretion of the Chair of Governors if a review of the procedure is required.

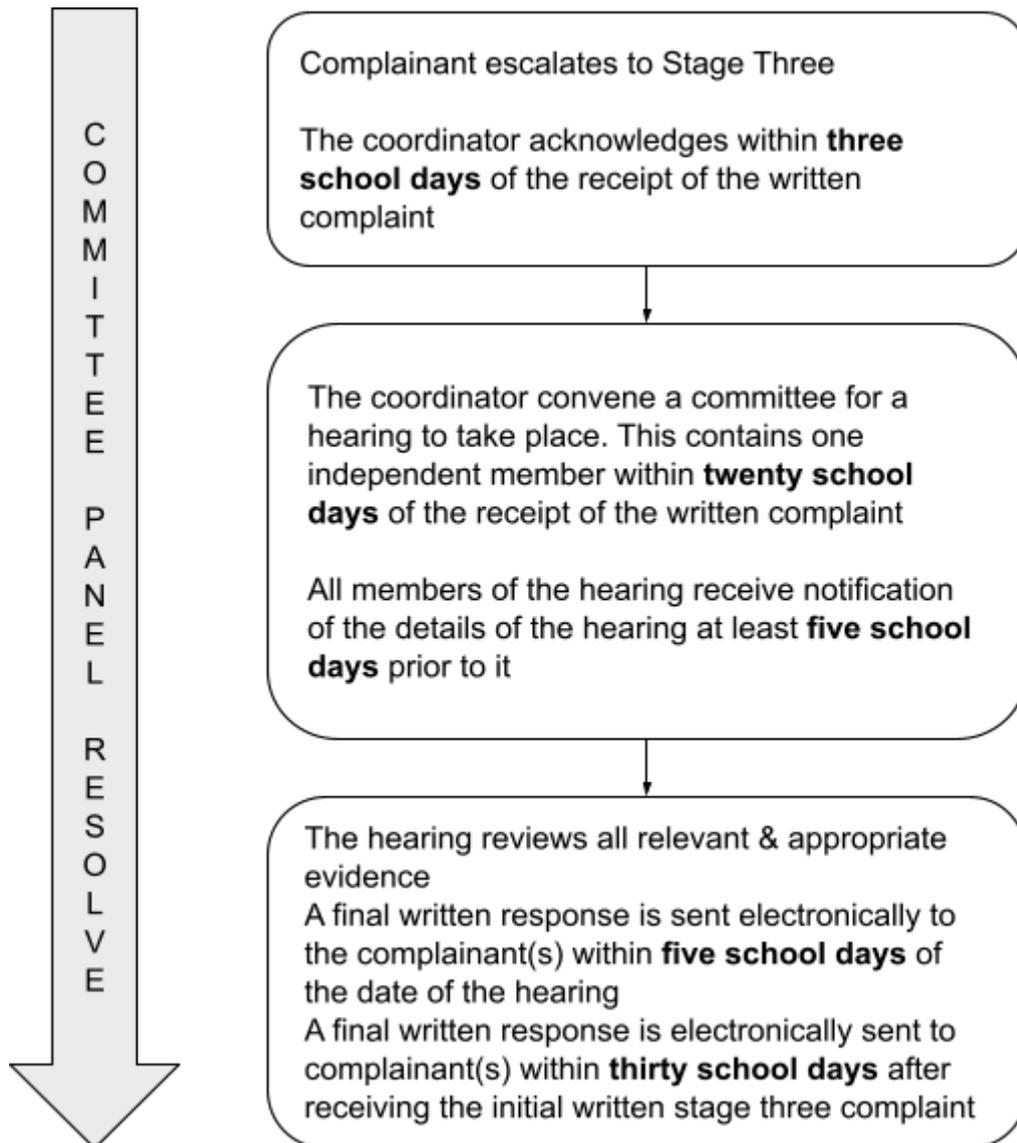
After the appointment of the person to undertake the independent review, the school aims to make a decision and inform the complainant within **thirty school days**. In carrying out this review, the independent review officer will not re-open the complaint, begin or commission a fresh investigation or adjust the original determination.

This review may be provided as a quality assurance exercise to determine whether the Complaints Committee acted within the scope of this policy. In such instances, the independent review officer may either:

- Determine the procedure was in line with the policy and uphold the decision
- Deem that there were procedural flaws and direct the Complaints Committee to re-hear the complaint

**This decision is final and binding.**

**Summary of Stage 3 - Complaints Committee**



**Stage 4: Referral to the Department of Education (DfE)**

If the complainant(s) remain dissatisfied with the decision of the Complaints Committee, they are entitled to refer it to the Department of Education. The DfE will only investigate the complaint in limited circumstances.

For more information on the DfE's remit visit:

**[www.gov.uk/government/complaint-about-an-academy](http://www.gov.uk/government/complaint-about-an-academy)**

## **Roles & Responsibilities**

A complaint will follow a procedure that involves a number of key people. The role of each of these, is defined below:

### **(i) The role of the Complaints Coordinator**

The Complaints Coordinator will act as the point of contact for complainant(s) and the Complaints Committee. The Complaints Coordinator will:

- Ensure the complainant and the Complaints Committee are fully updated at each stage of the procedure
- Liaise with the Principal, Governing Body and Trustees to ensure there is a smooth running of the complaints procedure
- Be mindful of the timescales to respond to complaints
- Ensure those involved in the complaints procedure are aware of their legal right and duties
- Appoint a Chair of the Complaints Committee
- Ensure that the Complaints Committee has access to legal advice, where appropriate
- Take reasonable steps to ensure the Complaints Committee hearing takes place at a date, time and location that are convenient for all parties
- Collate any written evidence and information required and send it to all relevant parties within the timescales set out in this policy
- Minute the hearing
- Notify all parties of the Complaints Committee decision
- Assist in producing the final written response of the Complaints Committee

### **(ii) The role of the Principal (or the appointed Investigative Officer)**

The role of the Principal or appointed Investigative Officer at stage two is to

- Ensure that the right procedure is followed
- Ensure that an investigation is carried out and a report is compiled
- Ensure the complainant is fully updated through a stage two procedure
- To meet with the complainant, if appropriate

### **(iii) The role of the Chair of the Complaints Committee**

The role of the Chair of the Complaints Committee is to:

- Ensure that the hearing is conducted in a relaxed, informal manner
- Ensure that all parties are treated with respect, dignity and courtesy
- Explain the remit of the Complaints Committee to the complainant(s)
- Ensure that written evidence and information can be seen by all parties, provided there are no breaches of confidentiality or any individual's right to privacy
- Key findings of fact are made and shared with all parties involved
- Give the complainant and the school the opportunity to state their case and not allow the inclusion of issues not previously mentioned in writing
- Ensure the hearing is minuted

### **Records of Complaints**

A record will be kept of all written formal complaints regardless of whether they were upheld. This record will include the stage of the complaint, whether they were resolved and the action(s), if any, taken. Individual complaints will be kept confidential unless:

- Access is requested by the Secretary of State
- Disclosure is required in the course of an inspection
- A valid request is made under other legal authority
- A request from an individual to access their own personal information within the documentation

Any findings and recommendations of the Complaints Committee will be made available for inspection on the school premises.

### **Complaints Campaigns**

For the purposes of this policy, a complaint campaign is defined as three or more separate complainants (whether or not they are connected to the school) which are all based on the same subject matter.

Depending on the subject matter in question, the school may deviate from the staged procedure set out in this policy and will instead:

- Send a template response to all complainants and/or
- Publish a single response on the school's website

**Appendix 1 - Stage 2 Complaints Form**

Please ensure that handwritten responses are completed in BLOCK CAPITALS

Please return the completed form to:

**governanceandcomplaints@dorsetstudioschool.co.uk**

Your name	
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Student's name	
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Your relationship to the student	
----------------------------------	--

Address, incl. postcode	
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Contact telephone number (1)	
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Contact telephone number (2)	
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Please give full details of your complaint below:

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What action, if any, have already taken to try and resolve your complaint?  
To whom did you speak with and what was the response?

What would you like as an outcome of your complaint?

If you are attaching any paperwork, please provide details

**Signature:** .....

**Date:** .....

All functions of the complaints procedure adhere to the requirements of an individual's right to privacy and information held on them.

**Office Use**

**Date received:** .....